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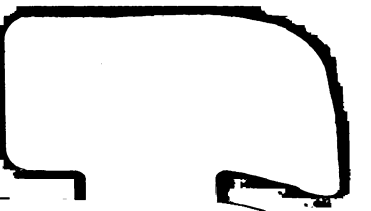

NBI
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The
True Church

THE

TRUE CHURCH.

BY

THEODORE TILTON.

ILLUSTRATED FROM DESIGNS BY

GRANVILLE PERKINS.

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"YON IVY ON THE ABBEY WALL."

"AROUND A FONT THE PEOPLE PRESSED."

"WE WALKED IN FERNS SO WET WITH DEW."

"WE BRUSHED A COBWEB FROM A PANE."

"WE TURNED AWAY AMONG THE TOMBS."

"A MEETING-HOUSE AROSE IN VIEW."

"STILL FOLLOWING WHERE THE HIGHWAY LED,
TILL ELMS MADE ARCHES OVERHEAD."

"AFAR FROM EVERY CHURCH WE STRAYED."

"BUT SUCH A SPLENDOR FILLED THE PLACE."

One Sabbath morn I roamed astray,
And asked a Pilgrim for the way:

"Oh tell me, whither shall I search,
That I may find the one true church?"

He answered, "Search the world around,
The one true church is never found:

"Yon ivy on the abbey wall
Makes fair the falsest church of all."

But, fearing he had told me wrong,
I cried, "Behold the entering throng."

He murmured, "If a church be true,
It hath not many, but a few!"

Around a font the people pressed,
And crossed themselves on brow and breast.

"A cross so light to bear," he cried,
"Is not of Christ the Crucified!

"Each forehead, frowning, sheds it off:
Christ's cross remains through scowl and scoff!"

We entered at the open door,
And saw men kneeling on the floor;

Faint candles, by the daylight dimmed—
As if by foolish virgins trimmed;

Fair statues of the saints, as white
As now their robes are, in God's light;

Stained windows, casting down a beam
Like Jacob's ladder in the dream.

The Pilgrim gazed from nave to roof,
And, frowning, uttered this reproof:

"Alas! who is it understands
God's temple is not made with hands?"

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walked in ferns so wet with dew
They plashed our garments trailing through.

And came upon a church whose dome
Upheld a cross, but not for Rome.

We brushed a cobweb from a pane,
And watched the service in the fane.

"Do prayers," he asked, "the more avail,
If offered at an altar rail?

"Does water, sprinkled from a bowl,
Wash any sin from any soul?

"Do tongues that taste the bread and wine
Speak truer after such a sign?"

Just then, upon a maple spray,
Two orioles perched, and piped a lay—

Until the gold beneath their throats
Shook molten in their mellow notes.

Resounding from the church, a psalm
Rolled, quivering, through the outer calm.

"Both choirs," said I, "are in accord,
For both give praises to the Lord."

"The birds," he answered, "chant a song
Without a note of sin or wrong:

"The church's anthem is a strain
Of human guilt and mortal pain."

The orioles and the organ ceased,
And in the pulpit rose the priest.

The Pilgrim whispered in my ear,
"It profits not to tarry here."

"He speaks no error," answered I,
"He teaches that the living die;

"The dead arise; and both are true;
Both wholesome doctrines; neither new."

The Pilgrim said, "He strikes a blow
At wrongs that perished long ago,

"But covers with a shielding phrase
The living sins of present days."

We turned away among the tombs—
A tangled place of briers and blooms.

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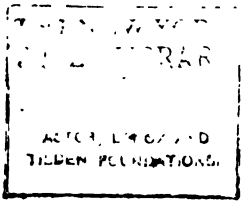

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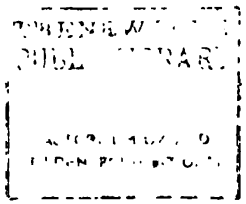

I spelled the legends on the stones:
Beneath reposed the martyrs' bones—

The bodies which the rack once brake,
In witness for the dear Lord's sake—

The ashes gathered from the pyres
Of saints whose souls went up through fires.

The Pilgrim murmured as we passed,
"So gained they all the crown at last:

"Men lose it now, through looking back
To find it at the stake and rack:

"The rack and stake are old with grime:
God's touchstone is the living time."

passed where poplars, gaunt and tall.
Let twice their length of shadow fall.

A meeting-house arose in view,
Of bleached and weather-beaten hue.

Men plain of garb and pure of heart
Divided church and world apart:

Nor did they vex the silent air
With any sound of hymn or prayer:

God's finger to their lips they pressed,
Till each man kissed it, and was blest.

I asked, "Is this the true church, then?"
He answered, "Nay, a sect of men:

"And sects, that lock their doors in pride,
Shut God and half his saints outside:

"The gates of Heaven, the Scriptures say,
Stand open wide by night and day:

"To enter, therefore, is there need
To carry key of church or creed?"

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STILL following where the highway led,
Till elms made arches overhead,

We saw a spire, and weather-cock,
And snow-white church upon a rock:

A rock where, centuries before,
Came sea-tossed pilgrims to the shore.

My sandals straightway I unbound,
Because the place was holy ground.

I cried, "One church at last I find
That fetters not the human mind."

"This church," said he, "is like the rest;
For all are good, but none is best."

far from every church we strayed—
Save Nature's pillared aisles of shade.

The squirrels ran to see us pass,
And God's sweet breath was on the grass.

I challenged all the creeds, and sought
What truth, or lie, or both they taught.

I asked, "Had Augustine a fault?"
The Pilgrim gazed at Heaven's high vault,

And answered, "Can a mortal eye
Contain the sphere of all the sky?"

I said, "The circle is too wide."
"God's truth is wider!" he replied:

"When Augustine was on his knee,
He saw how little he could see:

"When Luther sought with burning heart,
He caught the glory but in part:

"When Calvin opened wide his soul,
He comprehended not the whole:

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"Not Luther, Calvin, Augustine,
Saw visions such as I have seen."

While yet he spake, a rapture stole
Through all my body and my soul.

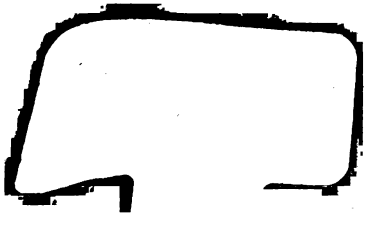
I looked upon his holy brow,
Entreating, "Tell me, who art THOU?"

But such a splendor filled the place,
I knew it was the Lord's own face!

I was a sinner, and afraid!
I knelt in dust, and thus I prayed:

"O Christ the Lord! end Thou my search,
And lead me to the one true church."

He spake, but not as man may speak:
"The one true church thou shalt not seek:

"Seek thou for evermore, instead,
To find the one true Christ, its Head!"

The Lord then vanished from my sight,
And left me standing in the light.